A Review of *Jesus, Contradicted*

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Michael R. Licona. *Jesus, Contradicted: Why the Gospels Tell the Same Story Differently*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2024. 266 pp. ISBN 978-0-310-15959-9. $34.99.

Michael R. Licona, PhD is a professor of New Testament studies at Houston Christian University. This book is preceded by *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?* The author explains that he was prompted by the publisher to write a book that would be an "easier read for nonscholars" (17). Feedback and reviews from others also showed the need to address "how my proposals fit with the doctrines of divine inspiration and inerrancy" and therefore "is written primarily for Christians with a high view of Scripture (i.e., Scripture is divinely inspired and authoritative)" (17).

Book Summary

The first eleven chapters introduce readers to the incongruency between a traditional understanding of inerrancy, or those holding to a Bible with "no errors" (10), and difficulties or contradictions in the Synoptic Gospels. The reader is assured (chapter 1) that the truth of Christianity is not at stake, since this relies on the resurrection of Jesus (5), "Contradictions offer a challenge to the historical reliability of the Gospels and some versions of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy" (7). The reader is introduced with some depth to what the author thinks are probable (not just *possible*) solutions, then other attempts. This involves introducing the reader to the Synoptic problem (chapter 2), especially of sources used and who wrote first (the author favors Markian priority), and how the Gospel of John restates Jesus' words in his own words (chapter 3). Licona admits this may be "unnerving" (48) to some. He suggests this is because

some think *God-breathed* (2 Tim 3:16) leaves the impression God dictated to the biblical writers what to write. But he assures his reader that this chapter does "not challenge the divine inspiration of Scripture" only "some understandings of it" (48). Licona cites Warfield against a full dictational view and gives the first principles that must be followed: "*our view of Scripture should be consistent with what we observe in Scripture*" (50, emphasis his). After surveying the kinds of biographies (chapter 4) around the first century, Licona thinks "the four Gospels in the New Testament share much in common with the genre of ancient biography" (52). They are similar in focusing on a character, history (narration of events), number of words, lack of allegories about Jesus, and only a small familial line. Licona thinks it "odd" (53) that some consider the Gospels to be a unique genre (*sui generis*) as it is "undeniable that they are closely affiliated with that genre [Greco-Roman biography]" (54).

Since, truth-telling in ancient biography differs from any modern approach (chapter 5), "ancient biographies had the underlying objective of reporting historical events about a historical person." However, this should not be "pressed too far because not all biographers and historians in antiquity had the same commitment to accuracy" (65). Even when a movie is "based on true events," producers are "free to take some artistic license" (66). "Truth-telling in ancient historiography permitted the facts to be reported with some elasticity" (67). In Licona's view this "does not undermine the overall reliability of the literature in which they appear, as long as we have the understanding that what we are reading was most often intended to convey an accurate gist of the people and events described rather than preserving details with the precision of a legal transcript" (68). Licona thinks this is important because the Gospels must be viewed through the correct lenses, or readers are "bound to misinterpret a number of items in them" (76). "If what I have suggested above is correct . . . it would be senseless to attempt to harmonize details . . . we may miss important theological points, . . . When the Gospels are read through lenses prescribed for reading ancient biography, a lot more comes into focus" (76). Those uneasy with this approach may ask, "how can I distinguish between what is true and what may not be?" (77). Licona responds historians have the tools to help (78). "Some readers may still struggle with the Evangelists being somewhat flexible with the details they sometimes report" (80). So, would divine inspiration allow distorted facts that create error (80)? Licona thinks, the error-free Bible

argument has "many problems" (80) and people differ on what is regarded as an error. But given the first principle "this is what divinely inspired Scripture looks like" (80).

Licona next turns to compositional textbooks (chapter 6) and other devices evidenced in ancient biographies (chapters 7-9). Although illiteracy was pervasive in the ancient world, one should anticipate that the Gospel authors or their secretaries (amanuenses) will use such literary devices, and Licona attempts to show they do. This includes conflating Jesus's questions, substituting terms (e.g., the kingdom of heaven with God), the use of a rhetorical device (e.g., anabasis) that increases emphasis, and other examples show simplification of stories, and creation of "a bit of dialogue" (91). Licona considers these important because "we learn that divine inspiration allowed the Evangelists to make minor changes, even to the words of Jesus, although the underlying message remained similar" (98). These and more techniques according to Licona are "practically universal in ancient historiography" (103). He illustrates and explains these by first showing their use in Greco-Roman biographies, especially from Plutarch's *Lives*. Since the "evangelists may very well be employing these devices" (104) he then shows their use in the Synoptic Gospels. The primary devices explained in some detail include,

- Compression: The author portrays an event over a shorter period than occurred (chapter 7).
- Displacement: The author removes an event from its original context to another (chapter 9).
- Transferal: The author attributes an action to another person (chapter 8).
- Conflation: The author combines multiple events or people and narrates them as one (chapter 7).
- Simplification: The author omits or alters details to abbreviate ideas (chapter 7).
- Literary Spotlighting: The author only mentions the person(s) even though others were present (chapter 7).

Some of Licona's probable solutions garnish more scholarly acceptance (110, 121). However, with these literary devices, authors commonly employed a degree of flexibility to go beyond the

strict writing of what happened or what was said. Therefore, a dictational view of inspiration or an inflexible view of inerrancy must be revised.

Chapter 10 introduces what Licona calls the outer limits even "radical" (161) literary devices. Hence, the reader is forewarned:

> If Scripture teaches something about itself that appears to be inconsistent with what I observe in Scripture, I will have to consider either (A) I have an incorrect view of what Scripture teaches about itself, (B) my interpretation of what I observe in Scripture is incorrect, or (C) Scripture is, in fact, inconsistent with itself and, therefore incorrect on a particular matter (150).

Licona summarizes the points he expects the reader to have learned in the book (150-151) and turns to the New Testament use of the Old Testament: "two phenomena we often observe when this occurs" (151). First, repurposing Scripture is "assigning a meaning to it that is foreign to its original one" (151). His examples include Matthew 2:14-15 cites Hosea 11:1 "Matthew is engaged in a creative hermeneutic, whereby he takes an Old Testament text, assigns it a meaning that is entirely foreign to its original one, and then repurposes it to his context" (153). For Hebrews 1:5, "The author of Hebrews has taken a text that originally references Israel's new king and applies it to Jesus in a far more exalted sense" (153). "The author of Hebrews who repurposes this text informs us elsewhere that Jesus was sinless. Notwithstanding, Hebrews 1:5 applies this text to Jesus" (153). And Acts 2:22-32 "Peter repurposes the text to be referring to Jesus and his resurrection instead of to David" (155). Second, composite citations are when "an ancient author takes portions from two or more texts, combines them, and presents them as a single text" (155). His example, Matthew 27:9-10 "He [Matthew] borrowed the word *field* from Jeremiah (32:9), inserted it into the text from Zechariah, loosely paraphrased the text, attributed it to Jeremiah, interpreted it to say something quite different from the original meaning of either text, and then claimed Scripture had been fulfilled" (158). Licona is "somewhat uncomfortable" (158) and thinks that such a prophesy "does not impress" (159). Finally, for editorial fatigue he turns to Mark Goodacre (*The Synoptic Problem*, 2001) who "provides several examples, some of which are far more compelling than others" (161). Licona finds the "clearest and most interesting

example" (161) in Luke version of Jesus's parable of the minas (Matt. 25:14-30 // Luke 19:12-26). "The item of interest here is that the first servant has eleven minas, not ten. The one having ten is the first servant in *Matthew's version* of the parable . . ." (165). This "suggests editorial fatigue" (165) and "two possibilities" (166) are suggested: "Jesus told the parable differently at times. Luke included one of the versions and confused some details with those in another version," (166) or "Luke, his secretary, or his source altered the parable and neglected to clean up a few minor details that no longer fit" (166). Licona says, "some of the more radical examples make me uncomfortable too" (167). And "although Scripture informs us it is divinely inspired, it does not tell us how it is inspired or how inspiration occurred" (167). "The presence of editorial fatigue reveals that the human element in Scripture produced imperfections. Therefore, by whatever means God inspired Scripture, it was rarely if ever accomplished by God somehow dictating the words for the biblical authors to write" (167).

All this leads Licona to conclude with two chapters, dealing with fine-tuning our doctrine of Scripture: Inspiration (chapter 11) and Inerrancy (chapter 12). For inspiration, Licona wants to answer the *why* and *how* of inspiration. He thinks "it is rational for a Christian to believe that it is" (171) and offers four reasons or building blocks:

1) Jesus rose from the dead. Here attention is drawn to what historians agree about the resurrection and the improbability of it being any kind of hallucination, therefore the resurrection hypothesis is the best explanation of the known facts and that is a "good reason for devoting our serious consideration to his teachings" (171). Such is not separated from arguments for the existence of God, but this is beyond the scope of the book (174 n6).

2) The New Testament preserves significant information about Jesus's claims. A growing number of historians think Jesus's claim to be divine "in some sense" (175) and prediction of death and resurrection rests on sufficient evidence.

3) Jesus believed that the Old Testament Scriptures were divinely inspired. Here several New Testament passages show that "Jesus's belief that the Scriptures are divinely inspired is so strongly evidenced by such a clear motif permeating all four Gospels that it is rightly concluded

as being an authentic element of the historical Jesus" (176-177). The New Testament authors believed this too, and, although several disagreements existed between early Christians and Jews, their view of Scripture was not in dispute.

4) Divine teachings are preserved in the New Testament. Jesus bestowed authority on his apostles that "are preserved in the New Testament literature, we may say that literature, at least some of the content it contains, is divinely authoritative and inspired" (178). Licona next attempts to answer *how* this happened. The uses of "God-breathed" (*theopneustos,* 2 Timothy 3:16) are explored outside of Scripture in secular and Church fathers. Drawing from John C. Poirier's work (*The Invention of the Inspired Text*, 2021), While not uncritical of Poirier's work (see Appendix) he concludes,

> the process of divine inspiration is not described in Scripture, our interpretation of
> what it means to say Scripture is 'divinely inspired' should be consistent with
> what we observe in Scripture and allow for human imperfections to be present in
> it, since they clearly are. Such imperfections would be present in the items said to
> be *theopneustos* in some of the other ancient literature we examined. Therefore,
> the term *theopneustos* in 2 Timothy 3:16 does not contribute as much to our
> discussion as we may have initially anticipated that it would (185).

Licona thinks 2 Peter 1:20-21, which uses the term "carried along" (*pherō*) is an action of God (Holy Spirit) "to bring a thought or idea into circulation" (187) similar to God guiding us when we share the gospel (187). Verbal and plenary inspiration "can only be defended if we think of them in a nuanced manner . . ." (188). This nuanced manner is explained in terms of possible worlds and God's middle knowledge (189). He concludes,

> Even with the imperfections and peculiarities that accompany the human element
> in Scripture, God still placed his approval on the final product, though this does
> not mean he regards every word and argument in Scripture as being ideal (190).

Licona reiterates his first principle and introduces his second:

> If I truly have a high view of Scripture, I will embrace it as God has given it to us rather than insist that it conforms to a model shaped by how I think he should have given it. If I refuse to do this, I may sincerely believe that I hold a high view of Scripture when I actually hold a high view of my view of Scripture (191).

For inerrancy, here it is noted "that the Bible does not provide us with a theory of inspiration is widely acknowledged" (193 n1), and therefore one "must be careful about concluding that the inerrancy of Scripture, or a certain view of it, is the logical implication . . ." (193). He then offers two lenses to view inerrancy: The traditional view is critiqued, and the flexible view is defended. The Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI) is cited as representative of the traditional view (194). The argument used for inerrancy is, God cannot err, the Bible is God's word, therefore, the Bible cannot err (195). Licona offers three challenges to it. First, it has unstated freight. Licona adds the unstated freight to the argument: "*in any way, including the details*", the second premise "*all of the words in the Bible are the very words God spoke,*" and the conclusion "*in any way, including the details*" (199, emphasis his). Licona acknowledges the logic is valid, but the second premise is false (199). Even if he adds his revised approach to the second premise "*in the sense of being God's message (or God's teachings),*" it is now just invalid (199). Second, the traditional view is too limited in scope. Licona demonstrates errors in our current Bible. While he agrees with CSBI that errors in existing copies do not jeopardize either view of inerrancy (201), he concludes:

> If the human element in the transmission process resulted in textual errors, one may reasonably suspect that the human element in the composition process could have resulted in some errors. Furthermore, since God could have preserved a text without any errors in the details but did not, he must not have thought it was important for us to have such a text (204).

The final critique is that the traditional view goes too far in that they (e.g., Norman Geisler and Albert Mohler) make it (traditional inerrancy) a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. Licona thinks most evangelicals, especially outside America, would not agree.

The second lens is a flexible view of inerrancy. Licona says, "flexible inerrancy to which I can subscribe: *the Bible is true, trustworthy, and authoritative, and without error in all that it teaches*" (206, emphasis his). This view is "open to the possibility of the presence of some errors *in the autographs*" (207). How? "God allowed the human element to introduce errors in the text during the transmission process while ensuring that the integrity of Scripture's message was preserved" (207). This Licona thinks is reflected in Paul's teaching (2 Corinthians 13:2-3) as Christ is "speaking through" him. This flexible approach is consistent with "what we observe in Scripture—imperfections resulting from the human authors, such as Matthew and Luke improve Mark's grammar, editorial fatigue, and memory lapse" (208). Licona, then answers for challenges to his flexible inerrancy. First, why trust theological statements? Here he critiques Paul Feinberg's chapter, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," argues for an inseparable connection between biblical historical and theological statements. Licona does not think this follows, as a text can be reliable even if it has "errors in minor details" (209). Second, is this a lower view of Scripture? Here the issue is correct and wrong. If the flexible view is correct, then the traditional view would be wrong. Third, is this a slippery slope to rejecting the Bible? Licona answers by giving an example of personal testimonies of how someone lost their faith in Scripture because of the traditional view, and another had their faith saved (restored) as a result of Licona's flexible inerrancy. Embracing the flexible view does not result in giving up the Bible and Christianity (215). Finally, is "inerrant" the best term to describe the Bible? Licona, as well as others, prefer "reliable," "truthful," "trustworthy," and "infallible" to "inerrant." He concludes by identifying that his approach to the doctrine of Scripture, along with others, is a bottom-up approach. One looks at Scripture and then formulates their view of Scripture. Others take a top-down approach. They begin with assumptions of what divinely inspired Scripture must be and then read Scripture given that model (218).

A Brief Critique

While not a full response to what a traditional inerrantist finds objectionable in Licona's approach to inerrancy as expressed in *Jesus, Contradicted*, I think in what follows the reader will see, in outline form, the basis from which a fuller response can be launched.

Licona's take on the synoptic problem (chapters 1-3) does not directly threaten traditional inerrancy. Conservative scholars differ as to whether the synoptic problem threatens traditional inerrancy, some even question if there is a problem.[1] Most recognize the negative stance towards inspiration and anti-supernatural bias that dominates the field of biblical criticism.[2] The more controversial proposal is the suggestion that the synoptics are not a unique genre (chapter 4), or at least there is more influence on their authors (and amanuensis) from Greco-Roman compositional textbooks (chapter 6) and literary devices found in biographies (chapters 6-9).[3] The most objectional material and radical compositional devices (chapter 10) are when these require the author to move away from truth-telling and give license to make up and change events and dialogue. This serves as the primary basis for Licona to fine-tune inspiration and inerrancy and adopt a 'flexible' approach to biblical inerrancy (chapters 11-12), which the traditional inerrantist finds unacceptable.

Licona's name for his position, 'flexible inerrancy,' may be new, but the view expressed and even the kinds of examples put forward are not. One needs only to return to the debate B. B. Warfield had with Charles A. Briggs and Henry P. Smith in 1894.[4] Or the CSBI critique of G. C. Berkouwer and others in 1980.[5] Both 'limited inspiration' and 'limited inerrancy' were used. In my estimation, Licona has written one of the most challenging books against traditional or full inerrancy (or for limited inerrancy).[6] And his is likely to reach a wide audience as it is written to the non-scholar and suitable for group study with important take aways, chapter summary and questions at the end of each

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[1] See Eta Linnemann, *Is there a Synoptic Problem?* Trans. Robert W. Yarborough (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992).

[2] Eta Linnemann, *Biblical Criticism on Trial*, Trans. Robert W. Yarborough (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1990).

[3] See F. David Farnell, *The Canonical Gospels and Greco-Roman Biography* (Matthews, NC: Bastion Books, 2019).

[4] Benjamin B. Warfield, *Limited Inspiration* (1894 reprint ed., Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974).

[5] See Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980).

[6] He is in the tradition of Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate about the Bible: Inerrancy Versus Infallibility* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977. See the critical review by Matthew Dodd "Revisiting Stephen T. Davis's *The Debate about the Bible: Inerrancy Versus Infallibility*" *Journal of the International Society of Christian Apologetics*, vol. 14, 2021, 37-48. And others such as Peter Enns, Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005). See the response by Gregory Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

chapter. Indeed, traditional inerrantists must dust off the covers of their old CSBI books[7] and get to work writing for the non-scholars and scholars on full inerrancy or it is likely to be eclipsed in America, as has evidently happened elsewhere.

Some of Licona's evidence may be different, but not the method or result. I have commented elsewhere on Licona's use of Greco-Roman literary devices.[8] But even *if* such is granted, that is, let us say, the New Testament authors did use the same literary devices as pagan (Greco-Roman) authors. The full inerrantist would always say such would not be used to the extent that factual errors are affirmed in the autographs. The reason for this is what is strikingly absent from Licona's method and critique of traditional inerrancy. That is a thoroughgoing philosophical prolegomenon that supports a theology proper to be consistently used to do theology. The reason Licona struggles with answering the *how* question of inspiration (171) is because of a lack of a systematic theological method that gives him certain truths established apart from Scripture about God, language and meaning, and truth. These are necessary to get the doctrine of inerrancy right. Restricting one's method to just what is in the biblical text that can be supported by historical studies and eclectically using what seems to solve a theological problem (e.g., invoking middle knowledge, 189) does not suffice. Let me briefly sketch

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[7] The primary publications that came out of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy include, James Montgomery Boice, ed., The Foundation of Biblical Authority (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Biblical Errancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), Earl D. Radmacher & Robert D. Preus, eds., *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, eds., *Challenges to Inerrancy: A Theological Response* (Chicago, Moody, 1984), John D. Hannah, ed. *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago, Moody, 1984), and the articles and commentary available in R. C. Sproul & Norman L. Geisler, *Explaining Biblical Inerrancy: The Chicago statements on Biblical Inerrancy, Hermeneutics, and Application with Official ICBI Commentary* (Arlington, TX: Bastion Books, 2013). See also the more recent Norman L. Geisler & William C. Roach. *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012). Traditional inerrancy did not begin with CSBI. The fact that it has been held throughout the history of the church is what makes it traditional. In addition to Hanna, *Inerrancy and the Church* see John D. Woodbridge, *Biblica Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982) and Peter A. Lillback & Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., eds., *Thy Word Is Still Truth: Essential Writings on the Doctrine of Scripture from the Reformation to Today* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013).

[8] See my review "Michael R. Licona Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?" *Christian Apologetics Journal*, vol. 15, 2020, 113-125 and Norman L. Geisler & Douglas E. Potter, "A Seismic Shift in the Inerrancy Debate" March 28, 2018, https://defendinginerrancy.com/a-seismic-shift-in-the-inerrancy-debate/.

out what is lacking and fails to be appreciated in Licona's method and critique of traditional inerrancy.

Method

I grant that not all who hold to full inerrancy agree upon a method. The late R. C. Sproul identified three methods: confessional, presuppositional, and the classical inductive and deductive approach.[9] But I think the combination of inductive and deductive reasoning gives the greatest human certainty possible for full inerrancy. That is, one must first use deductive reasoning to demonstrate the existence and nature of God and then turn to an inductive study of Scripture that systematically integrates the two. When this is done, full or the traditional inerrancy results.[10]

God

This approach does not start top-down with assumptions about inspiration (218).[11] Far from that, it starts with the undeniable assertion that logic applies to reality (realism) and uses first principles or principles reducible to them to argue for the existence and nature of God. Not only is God's existence demonstrated[12] but so is the necessary nature of pure actuality (without passive potential) in which God is Being itself with no possibility for change or imperfection. So, when God acts, He alone is the efficient cause of being or finite goodness, which is making something perfect according to its nature, and must also be the sustaining cause of everything created, even if it becomes imperfect or corrupted.

Language and Meaning

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[9] See his chapter "The Case for Inerrancy: A Methodological Analysis" in *God's Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture*, edited by John W. Montgomery (Irvine, CA: NPR Books, 1974), 242-261.

[10] See Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Introduction Bible*, vol 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2002), Part One.

[11] Some may object that Scripture is the correct starting point (bottom-up as Licona does). Even if one does start there, it should be quickly observed that the Bible acknowledges truth about God can be know apart from Scripture from creation (Rom. 1:19-20) and the top-down approach is not doing this with assumptions. See James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[12] See Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), chapter 15.

This approach does not separate words from meaning to allow errors (207). God's knowledge is causal of all things and maintains the existence of all things, therefore the process of inspiration must involve both material words (language) and immaterial meaning. The meaning for the reader of a text-only arises from words in a recognized unit. The words are important because if they are not sufficient to constitute the right meaning, then the meaning is lost. But if the words are right, they can be copied and translated into any language; just as form is to matter, so too meaning is to language.[13] The same meaning can be said in multiple ways and arrangements of words within the conventions of a language. But it can be lost when the words are wrong. Therefore, while God certainly could have inspired meaning in the mind of the prophet (without giving the exact words to use, i.e., dictation) such cannot be separated from its expression in material words forming a unit of meaning since meaning can only be communicated to others through words. For inspiration it is efficiently caused by God and instrumentally by the human prophet. If not, then there is no sense in which the end written product is inspired by God. Inspiration is a supernatural act or miracle of God, that moves the fallen nature of the prophet to exist and function freely to choose words in accordance with God's will and write a book like any other book in the ancient world, with the exception that what is finally produced under the authority of the prophet is the autograph which contains no factual or theological errors since it is the word of God in confluence with the words of the prophet. One cannot separate meaning from words, and God cannot be involved in the production of error.

Truth

This approach does not allow for error to be expressed in the process of *theopneustos* (185, 190).[14] Truth in the human mind is obtained when something is affirmed in a proposition about reality in which there is correspondence between what is said and that

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[13] See the very important work by Thomas A. Howe, *Objectivity in Biblical Interpretation* (Advantage Books, 2004).

[14] Nor is it proper to take secular or later Christian usages of the term and read them into Paul's usage (180-185). In the absence multiple uses by the author or other biblical authors (as 2 Timothy 3:16 is the only biblical occurrence of this term), an interpreter should develop a Pauline theology that includes Paul's teaching on the Old Testament as the word of God, as well as God's nature and activity in and through human prophets to arrive at how the author uses this term.

which is.[15] Edward J. Young wrote, "By this word [inerrant] we mean that the Scriptures possess the quality of freedom from error. They are exempt from the liability to mistake, incapable of error. In all their teachers they are in perfect accord with the truth."[16] This notion of truth must be properly applied to the biblical text without negating the many *ways* that we can say the author's words corresponding to reality even when employing various figures of speeches[17] and literary devices. And no doubt there are literary devices that tend to suggest or require the author to deviate from truth-telling. But when the full inerrantist finds in manuscripts of the New Testament something that seems *not* to be true, an explanation must be put forward that removes its cause from God or the process of inspiration that results in a product of a written autographic text. Even if it is only a possible explanation it certainly becomes *more probable* than an explanation that cannot remove error from the autographic text. This is especially the case when the biblical authors stand in a tradition that separates them from the pagan ancient world by the obligation their tradition requires, namely, the preserving of the acts of God in history through truth-telling (Exod. 20:16) regardless of the genre or literary devices employed. Indeed, biblical literature stands apart from the myths of the ancient world.[18] So, truth-telling is an obligation for the human author and the very nature of God (John 17:17).

Hence, we know that *God cannot err*, not from Scripture alone, but from rational deductive argumentation concerning the existence and nature of God. We know that *the Bible is the word of God* because, through an inductive study, it claims to be and proves to be reliable in what it says about Jesus's claim to be divine, his bodily resurrection, and

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[15] See Norman L. Geisler, "The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate" in *The Collected Essays of Norman L. Geisler*, vol 2, Paul A. Compton, ed. (Matthew, NC: Bastion Books, 2019), 34-49.

[16] Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth: Some Thoughts on the Biblical Doctrine of Inspiration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 113.

[17] E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1968).

[18] See John N. Oswalt, *The Bible Among The Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

teaching (171-180). *Therefore, the Bible cannot err*. The argument is valid and sound, and only unsound if one changes the meaning (199).[19]

A model that emerges from abductive reasoning, which is absent from Licona's book, is that of Christ's hypostatic union of two distinct, but complete natures, human and divine, united in one Person. Just as the emphasis of Christ's humanity over his deity is heretical (i.e., docetism), so too is the emphasis of human features over its divine inspiration. Paul Feinberg wrote, "While care must be used in pressing the analogy between Christ and Scripture, it does show the *possibility* of an inerrant Bible, given the essential nature of humanity. Inerrancy becomes *necessary* because of the divine element."[20]

The so-called radical literary devices such as repurposing Scripture and composite citations were done by men of God under the inspiration of God. However odd, unconvincing, or uncomfortable (158) they may seem to us, they were needed for some readers of Scripture because they were persuasive. The previous generation of full inerrantists was well aware of them and did not see them as a reason to embrace limited inerrancy.[21] R. C. Sproul reminds us that in 1957

> [Edward J.] Young demonstrates that within the context of a Biblical view
> of truth there is room for crudity and roughness of literary style, including
> improper grammatical structure, variations of parallel accounts of events,
> discourses, etc., but not room for contradiction of deception.
> Phenomenological, anthropomorphical, hyperbolic, etc. forms of language
> do not negate or falsify truth.[22]

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[19] Geisler recounts that it was put forward as an "illustration" by John Gerstner, see Geisler, "Inerrancy and Foundationalism" in *The Collected Essays*, vol 2, 21. For a moral formal propositional argument for inerrancy, see Sproul, "The Case For Inerrancy," 248-260.

[20] "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy*, 282.

[21] See Gleason Archer, "Alleged Errors and Discrepancies in the Original Manuscripts of the Bible" in *Inerrancy* and Young, *Thy Word is Truth,* chapters 5, 6 & 7.

[22] R. C. Sproul, "Explaining Inerrancy," in *Explaining Biblical Inerrancy*, 259.

Most full inerrantists, of whom I am aware, as well as CSBI (Article XIII) do not consider grammatical 'errors' to be errors in a formal sense since grammar is descriptive, not prescriptive. Being tired and having to learn and improve, or not knowing or forgetting something, and having any of these reflected in writing does not constitute an 'error.' Indeed, presumably Jesus in his humanity became fatigued, slept, learned (Luke 2:52), did not know some things (Matt. 24:36), and likely practiced things. This is not sin. It was just growing and progressing as a human being according to one's nature and level of development. Indeed, we may not always be able to find the line between truth and error in areas of study. But when God is supernaturally involved in a process to make or produce something, even instrumentally using humans capable of error, such is not necessitated by the human element in the production of a written document.

The above theological position will never be reflected in negative critical scholarship since there is no commitment to the traditional biblical doctrine of inerrancy. History has shown their theories and criticism are often an inadequate source to draw explanations from and certainly do not override full inerrancy, even if they are in a majority. Can churches survive without traditional inerrancy? Sproul's comments are worth considering,

> When the church loses its confidence in the authority of sacred Scripture the church inevitably looks to human opinion as its guiding light. When that happens, the purity of the church is direly threatened. Thus, we urge upon our Christian brothers and sisters of all professions and denominations to join with us in a reaffirmation of the full authority, integrity, infallibility, and inerrancy of sacred Scripture to the end that our lives may be brought under the authority of God's Word, that we may glorify Christ in our lives, individually and corporately as the church.[23]

The fact that I can find some churches at a point in time surviving and appearing to do well with the term *flexible* put in their doctrinal statement before the term *inerrancy* –

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[23] R. C. Sproul, "Explaining Inerrancy," in *Explaining Biblical Inerrancy*, 123.

means nothing. As Harold Lindsell observed, "the trend away from orthodoxy may be slow, in movement, gradual in its scope, and almost invisible to the naked eye. When people awaken to what has happened, it is too late."[24] As Licona says, this is a matter of correct and wrong (211). Falling back on the truth of the resurrection of Jesus when things get uncomfortable (158) is not sufficient for the church that wants to follow Jesus's teaching. Since flexible inerrancy separates words from a message, it gives no theological assurance that the New Testament text reflects Jesus's view of Scripture or his other teachings. For that, you will need full inerrancy. Licona must answer how, no matter how small, of a God-inspired autographic text that has an actual error, not just a possible one, *contains* a message from God (178) without words forming the unit of meaning and not inspired by God. Or how perfect Being (=God) inspired a true message with words that entail error. Only when the words are God-inspired can one say, "the autographic text *is* the word of God" thus maintaining full inerrancy. Licona has merged two incompatible views, inerrancy, and errancy, and convinced himself and others that they are sustainable. Flexible inerrancy gives us a God-inspired, however so slightly errant autographic text because of human frailty, that we must still call 'inerrant' because the *message* is from God even if all the words constitute an error. But how can we be sure that the message is from God without knowing, apart from the Bible, the words must formulate truth in some way? If flexible inerrancy is true, our only hope is to seek scholars (78) with the best qualifications to judge for us where the inerrancy stops and the errancy begins. But here we have the problem. As then the Christian faith is built on nothing less than scholarly books of consensus, instead of the inerrant written word of God.

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[24] Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 185.